

Managing and mediating the research element on Master's courses: The roles of course leaders and supervisorsⁱ

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Abstract

This paper reports on a mapping study of dissertation supervision across distance Master's Courses in the University of London. The study suggests that there is a wide diversity of ways of handling Master's students at a distance due to the multiplicity of factors that impinge on distance supervision and a range of requirements in terms of the dissertation outcomes or products. The findings also suggest that in terms of the dissertation process, the course or programme leader plays a key role in dissertation supervision at a distance. The distance element means that course leaders take a more highly structured and hands on approach to provide support for students embarking on the dissertation. The paper suggests that rather than conceptualising the supervisory process on one axis (supervisor-supervisee), we need to understand it as a complex relationship involving multiple actors.

Keywords: dissertation, distance education, Master's, research education, supervision, course leadership

Introduction

In this chapter we consider the role of the supervisor and course leader in managing and mediating the research element of Master's courses. The research element or dissertationⁱⁱ is an important part of many Master's programmes, and is often seen as the programme's climax. It normally involves a single, longer piece of assessed work; it accounts for up to a third of the overall credits, is frequently research-based, and for many students, is the first piece of research they tackle. Pilcher (2011, p. 29) characterizes the Master's dissertation as an "elusive chameleon", suggesting that its relatively short span and fluid nature mean it can be adapted to suit any student. Its elusiveness is accentuated if we examine Master's level education internationally – e.g. in Scandinavian contexts where a Master's degree, rather than being completed in a year as in the UK, takes two years (Dysthe, 2002) or even longer (Ylioki, 2001).

The main support for any dissertation is provided by the supervisor, and the literature on supervision offers a range of conceptualizations of the supervisory process (though most research and writing on supervision has examined doctoral supervision; see below for additional detail). Lee's (2008) recent model is representative of the type of issues discussed. She describes five approaches and roles within doctoral supervision: a *functional* approach focusing on managing the project; an *enculturation* approach focusing on helping the student become a member of the disciplinary community; a *critical thinking* approach; an *emancipation* approach; and a *relationship development* approach. These issues arise in other studies as well – e.g., the tensions between supervisor authority and student agency and between academic and pastoral support (see Dedrick & Watson, 2002) and the tension between control and dependence and non-interventionist supervision, and between student autonomy and independence at various stages in the process (Delamont, Parry & Atkinson, 1998). Dysthe (2002) suggests that the rigid time frames and systems of control at Master's level in many institutions make this balance between direction/control and freedom particularly difficult to achieve. In fact, Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2006) suggest that supervision involves a complex weaving of guidance and student direction rather than a dichotomy between agency and control.

A number of studies focus on elements of pastoral support. Hockey (1994) highlights the need to balance guidance and critique with emotional support. Others emphasize the need for

empathy, particularly for part-time and distance supervision (Watts, 2008), and the importance of the emotional domain of supervision (Sambrook, Stewart & Roberts, 2008). However, Firth and Martens (2008) suggest that the transformation sometimes requested of supervisors is unnecessary and unhelpful; asking supervisors to “be both a mother figure who responds to emotional needs and a father figure who expects intellectual autonomy is exhausting and unsatisfactory”. They argue for exploring “supervision as a specialist form of *teaching* rather than a particular kind of self” (2008, p. 280 – italics in original).

Part of the tension within the supervisory relationship relates to student expectations. At Master’s level, this may mean that students expect more contact (Brown, 2007); more supervisory direction, such as setting deadlines (Hetrick and Trafford, 1995) or initiating meetings (Archibong, 1995); or actual direct instruction (Woolhouse, 2002) and help with writing up (Archibong, 1995). Woolhouse speculates that the divergent expectations may reflect power and experience differentials between supervisor and supervisee, and suggests that both sets of expectations need to be discussed at the beginning of the supervisory process.

These themes are echoed in research involving international students. Archibong (1995) found mismatches between overseas students’ expectations and what they received, possibly explained by previous experiences and differences in academic culture. Cadman (2000, p. 488) found that international students (both doctoral and Master’s) felt challenged by the need to develop a critical academic approach and produce appropriate academic discourse, and emphasizes the importance of “a holistic approach to students’ development”.

Most of the issues discussed above assume even greater importance in distance education. Firstly, the sense of isolation can be heightened in such contexts: supervision is not face-to-face and the individual nature of the work means that the online tools, collaborations and peer discussions supporting previous learning on the course are unavailable or minimal. Distance Master’s courses may also include many international students studying in a language other than their own, leading to communication problems and issues emanating from different cultural expectations regarding supervision.

Interestingly, despite the growing numbers of Master’s students worldwide (Anderson, Day and McLaughlin, 2006) and in the UK (Ginn, 2014) there is little research on Master’s dissertation supervision, in contrast to doctoral education (Petersen 2007). In some studies the

Master's level remains hidden: some assume a direct transition from undergraduate to doctoral studies (e.g. Sambrook et al., 2008), whereas others do not indicate which level the research examines (e.g. Cadman, 2000). In the distance education literature, Master's level supervision is never mentioned; within the research on doctoral studies at a distance (e.g. Lindner, Dooley & Murphy, 2001; Wikely and Muschamp, 2004), there is very little on supervision.

Taking this research base into consideration, our study focused on dissertation supervision on distance Master's programmes within the federal structure of the University of Londonⁱⁱⁱ. The research questions were:

1. How is the dissertation conceptualized on distance Master's courses at the University of London?
2. What is the relationship between this final project and previous work done on the Master's?
3. What types of support do distance courses at the University of London provide at the dissertation stage for students?

Methodological approach

We started with a documentary mapping exercise involving a survey of course outlines and handbooks. Thirty-seven distance Master's courses with a research element were identified through an online search, and publicly available course documentation was collected. Details of dissertation requirements were identified (e.g. length in words, topic choice, type of work, credit value, etc.), providing an overview of practices in different institutions and programmes.

Course leaders were then invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to explore, in relation to their course, the conceptualization of the dissertation, the support provided to students, and supervisory practices. Nine course leaders agreed to be interviewed. An interview schedule was developed, and eight face-to-face and one telephone interview were carried out. All were recorded with the interviewees' permission, transcribed, and analysed for recurring themes. Two course leaders spoke about groups of related courses rather than a single Master's course, so although the findings cover nine programme areas, they represent

more than nine named qualifications. In addition, course leaders act as supervisors in many cases, so they often spoke about supervision in a dual role.

In accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) we obtained informed consent from the participants and provided them with the draft summary of the findings from course documentation and the draft analysis of interviews, for correction, clarification and agreement on the presentation of their contributions. We complied with requests to remove quotations or phrases, and have preserved anonymity as far as possible in our analysis.

Findings

The Product: Conceptualizations and Purposes of the Research Project

The documentation revealed wide differences in nomenclature, length, credit allocation and requirements between different institutions, as well as great variety in the conceptualization of the research project. In some cases it is compulsory (sometimes a proposal is even part of the application for the programme), in others it is optional (sometimes dependent on students' previous performance, sometimes related to the discipline and to the professional orientation of the programme), and in two cases there was no research option. In some cases, undertaking the research option depends on students' performance on previous modules. The research element is also known by different names: 'dissertation', 'report', 'project', 'written report', 'project report', 'scientific report' and 'scientific paper'. Most courses offer a range of options; some differences are discipline related, but some are linked to issues of distance mode (e.g. where ethical considerations are particularly challenging, such as conducting research with vulnerable people overseas with no local supervisor.)

There is also variation in terms of structure, with science courses requiring a more standardized structure and others offering guideline structures for the various approaches possible. Similarly, required word counts vary considerably, from 4,000 through to 20,000, the most common being 10,000 words. Again courses may offer a range, some listing an indicative amount or minimum, or specifying length in terms of pages.

There was less variation in terms of purpose, with nearly all course leaders listing one or more of the following as the main purposes of the dissertation:

- putting into practice the learning from the previous modules,

- gaining an understanding and experience of how to do research and being taught to do it,
- giving students the opportunity to explore a topic of interest in-depth.

Other purposes mentioned included providing opportunities for producing an extended piece of writing; providing opportunities for students to do something more self-directed; and preparing students for studying at doctoral level.

The Process: initiating and staging the research project

Students are helped to proceed with the research process in various ways. Most courses have compulsory research methods modules, or cover research methods within core modules. One course has an intensive process for preparing the proposal before students are allowed to progress with the dissertation, and has dropped the research methods module requirement, since in reality the supervisor was providing the necessary support. Another course replaces a research module with online seminars on the research process.

All interviewees emphasized the importance of clear stages in the dissertation, with many courses having deadlines for intermediate drafts or progress reports. One course leader commented: “we just have to be so precise about our aims, our outcomes, our learning objectives, our assessment and our feedback and so on. We can’t afford to be in the slightest bit sloppy.”

The proposal stage is the first part explicitly laid out, and again there is variation as to how this is tackled. Some courses require a short proposal as part of the application; the course leader might have to approve this, and this is also sometimes assessed. In other cases, marks are allocated to the proposal (e.g. 10% of dissertation marks allocated to the proposal, and 90% to the final submission). For one course this has to be submitted and approved by the end of the autumn term, otherwise the student either has to defer a year or take the alternative route of more taught modules. On other courses the proposal is started during the research methods modules and is intensively supported. Ethics approval is also important and for some studies may involve approval from students’ employers (e.g. the NHS). There is thus an interaction between the practicalities and logistics of the proposed research on the one hand, and the practicalities and timetable of the programme, on the other.

Once the research project is underway, many courses require draft chapters or progress reports. The main purpose is for the student to produce something to indicate whether they are on track, what help they need, or whether they should be advised to defer or withdraw. Although these stages are fixed for many courses, there is also a degree of flexibility in how they are applied to individual students.

There is considerable variation of time allocated for supervision. Some courses specify this allocation, which varies from 5 hours (plus draft reading time) to 16 or 20 hours; others have no fixed time allocation. As one course leader says, some supervisors will provide only the amount of time allocated, whereas “other supervisors are very generous with their time and it always depends on what the student demands”. In this case, the course leader's response has been to have some guidelines on minimum responses (e.g. to proposals and drafts) and then leave it fairly open and “trust that it is satisfactory”.

All course leaders reported that supervisors commented on drafts, though with mixed views on how much correcting was appropriate. One course leader reported that college policy is that supervisors may only comment, not proofread, whereas others were more open as to whether supervisors should track changes on drafts. They all mentioned making allowances for language, focusing on comprehension rather than grammatical accuracy, and some specifically encourage students to get their work proofread. In general, the students' level of English was not seen as the main problem, compared with other issues such as being able to conceptualize research. Finally, technology is important in supporting students during the research process, contributing to a sense of an online community and encouraging peer support. However, there is wide variation in the technology used, with the main one being email, supplemented in some cases by a dedicated VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). Some have only asynchronous online options for communication, due to geographical considerations, but others are considering developing more conferencing facilities.

The degree to which courses structure activities and materials on a VLE varies, and two course leaders commented on the lack of online support. Those who did not have particular spaces online for students to post proposals or research questions, or to be involved in discussions on writing or literature reviews, felt that this was something they should introduce in order to create a learning community: “We really need to make them into a little community, (...) lots of them could help each other, advise each other and also (...) they need

to have some peer input, to give them a sense of timing.”

However, others pointed out how difficult the sense of community was to achieve and maintain, as when students reached the point of needing advice on their individual project, they preferred to talk to their supervisors rather than peers, and the cohort became less cohesive and more individual: “My view of it is, once they are off writing their topic, they don’t really want to talk to anybody else. They want to talk to their tutor”. Others felt that participation could be encouraged and students trained to use the VLE sites they were already familiar with.

On the whole, however, course leaders felt that levels of participation online were good and that there would always be students who were less inclined to be part of a learning community, whether face-to-face or online. In addition, in some cases students did set up informal networks using options like Skype for this purpose. As one course leader pointed out, participation online does not guarantee a good quality dissertation:

I think generally we have very high levels of engagement and participation within our VLE. ... Some students go off largely and do their own thing and produce very good pieces of work, some students participate very well but actually don’t produce very good pieces of work...you can’t generalize.

The Participants: The role of the course leader

An important finding that emerged was the central role of the course leader in supporting students and supervisors. All the course leaders interviewed were involved in finding supervisors, either from the course team, from across the institution, or even externally. They spent considerable effort matching supervisors to students, aiming to find supervisors who shared an interest in the subject of the proposal or had experience in the relevant methodological approach. One course leader takes ‘bids’ from supervisors, as he feels they are more likely to provide higher quality supervision on projects they were interested in. Often the course leader introduces the supervisor to the student, though this is sometimes done by administrators. In one case the course leader takes an initial look at the proposals and may communicate with the supervisor and the student about areas that need addressing.

Some courses provide detailed supervision guidelines, whereas in other cases supervisors who work at both Master’s and doctoral level simply follow guidelines for the latter, reinforcing

the point made earlier about conflating supervision at the two levels. Detailed guidelines are not always appropriate for fluid situations. Thus one course leader has mixed feelings about a new contract which his course had introduced for supervisors, feeling the ideal is to aim for flexibility: “It is almost impossible to implement but it sets a guideline to protect staff (...) from the student who sends them a draft every other day but also gives students an indication of what they are entitled to”.

Flexibility also emerged in discussions of how course leaders manage supervisors and the tension between asking supervisors to get students through the staged process with deadlines and interim submissions on the one hand, and, on the other, allowing supervisors to judge what students need and when. Some course leaders are relatively specific as to what they expect from supervisors, whilst others prefer to allow supervisors more flexibility:

While egalitarianism is one way to look at these things you can’t legislate for people’s differences and you are not going to be able to encourage people to come and supervise students if you start telling them, no don’t do it like that, do it like this.

Courses use various mechanisms to help supervisors and course leaders monitor the quality of supervision: fortnightly conference calls with the course teams across institutions; yearly meetings to debrief and consider new initiatives; an annual supervisors’ meeting with approximately 85 tutors. One institution offers supervisor training, but mainly for those who can attend in person, and another runs a regular peer reflection activity where individual staff bring a teaching and learning issue, such as supervision, to be discussed. The course leader nevertheless still has to trouble-shoot, for example by facilitating contact with a supervisor when a student has not heard from them. Course leaders reported exerting peer pressure using a number of strategies: phoning, emailing or visiting the supervisor, or changing the supervisor if necessary.

The participants: Supervisors and students

As in the literature, our interviewees emphasized the importance of the supervisor-student relationship. The academic support supervisors provide was wide-ranging, and included: suggesting literature, subject knowledge guidance, developing the proposal, planning the research, helping students identify a small and sufficiently focused project, advising on ethics approval, methodological issues, linking research questions to literature review and data

collection and data analysis, commenting on drafts, helping students develop intellectually and helping them disseminate their work. Conceptualizing the research, limiting and focusing a wider initial idea or wider research design, and getting a feasible project together were frequent concerns.

The course leaders also talked about particular challenges for supervisors of distance students. These included negotiating appropriate amounts of support with individual students, as some might ask for help beyond what was stipulated: “It is quite challenging, I think, as a tutor to try and find that balance between being fair and being sort of flexible and accommodating individual needs”.

Another area of difficulty is managing e-mail communication, in terms of both content of messages and judging the degree to which students are struggling. As one course leader (speaking about his role as a supervisor) said

I do miss the student interaction and I feel I kind of know them but I don't really.... I don't know whether I need to chivvy them along or say this is not good enough and you could do better. So it is difficult to know how to manage them sometimes.

Phone calls are one solution, with supervisors on one course asking that the initial tutorial be by phone:

People are quite unhappy with supervising only by email. Discussion doesn't go fast enough. The kind of tuition you need, we think, at the beginning of the dissertation cuts off avenues of unproductive work and encourages people going in the right direction.

Another issue highlighted involved pastoral care at a distance, including the need to be sympathetic and understanding, calming students down and sometimes suggesting practical solutions such as deferrals. Course leaders suggested that more pastoral support was needed for distance than for face-to-face students. However, one course leader made the point that it is not possible to distinguish between academic and pastoral support, and gave an example of helping a struggling student by helping her to reconceptualize her own role in relation to the project:

At one point I encouraged her not to think of herself as a researcher but as a detective and this seemed to hit a chord with her... now I don't know what I was

giving her there. I am not sure whether that was pastoral support or academic support but it sort of did something to keep her hanging on in there.

The pastoral element was also present in comments made about the nature of distance, part-time students and why they might be slower to request help. A couple of course leaders felt that students who choose this method of study might be more private and more used to being self-sufficient, so admitting that they are struggling would be difficult. It is also possible that some students are not culturally inclined to bother busy supervisors: “Also the overseas students, they come from a different educational background where academic staff are held in high regard and almost untouchable, and under pressures so they don’t want to bother you.”

Discussion and Implications

This study confirms the great variability in the Master’s research element on different courses, the source of which is a combination of institutional requirements and disciplinary practices and options, reflecting Pilcher’s (2011) description of Master’s dissertations as having a ‘chameleon’ nature. However, such variability is not undesirable and a ‘one size fits all’ model probably does not exist. Variability can be viewed as a direct result of the multitude of contexts in which distance Master’s degrees are found. Course leaders and programme designers may in fact be using their experience and knowledge of their students to fine-tune and tailor their requirements and supervision of projects and dissertations to meet the needs of their own students, building on what works for them. Perhaps what is more important is that students clearly understand what support they will receive and also are given clear guidelines about the requirements of such projects on their specific programme.

Course leaders confirmed the findings in the literature (e.g. Hockey, 1994; Sambrook et al., 2008; Watts, 2008) that both academic and pastoral support are important, with specific difficulties of managing the latter at a distance. It was acknowledged that at a distance it was sometimes more difficult to know when a student was struggling. There was however, less concern than expressed in the literature (e.g., Cadman, 2000) over the specific problems of international students, and course leaders were generally not worried about language skills. There was more concern about *all* students’ abilities to conceptualize research; with international students the worry was more that they might feel supervisors are too important or busy to contact. This suggests that programmes need to consider explicitly what staged support is offered to distance students, particularly in the initial stages of developing their research proposal. All courses had some sort of structure in place to help students in the choice of topic

and conceptualization of the research project, but the amount and type of help provided varied greatly.

There was not much discussion in the interviews of a mismatch of expectations between supervisors and students, but course leaders did highlight the difficulties of ensuring that distance students received adequate support and feedback. This suggests that course leaders need to give more explicit encouragement to supervisors and students to discuss expectations and supervision plans. The level and type of support at various stages of the project was clearly something course leaders spend a great deal of time considering. An important theme in the interviews was the role of supervisors and the course leaders in guiding the research process, and here this study adds to our understanding in identifying the sources of support available to students, and the way these sources interact. Figure 1 shows the traditional conceptualization of the research element at Master's level: previous research has focused on one relationship, that of the student and the supervisor and their roles (e.g. Lee, 2008). However, in our study the course leader emerged as an important lynchpin of the dissertation process: approving topics, choosing supervisors, guiding, training and sometimes managing supervisors, and mediating between supervisors and supervisees in times of problems. Course leaders also deal both with supervisors not communicating effectively and with students not participating or contacting their supervisor (highlighting the importance of the pastoral support element on distance courses). Institutions could give more prominence to the roles of course leaders as mediators, advisors and motivators of supervisors, and acknowledge the importance of this aspect of course leaders' duties. Course leaders probably also need to check that students and supervisors are aware of the avenues open to them to negotiate their various expectations concerning levels of support and participation.

We would suggest that a more accurate representation of supervisory interaction is that shown in Figure 2, which also takes into account the community of peers which a student might draw upon at this stage of their studies (see our discussion of VLEs above). Our interviews revealed the role of the course leader in contributing to timely completion, focusing not only on academic concerns but also in channelling the research process into a tight time bound procedure which would accommodate various institutional procedures.

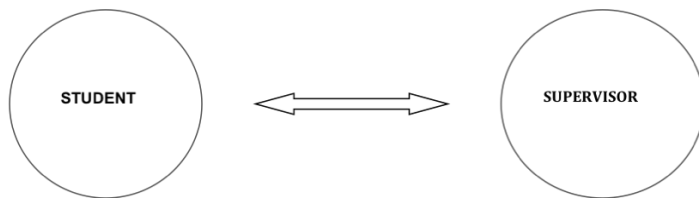


Figure 1: Traditional Conceptualization of Distance Master's Supervision

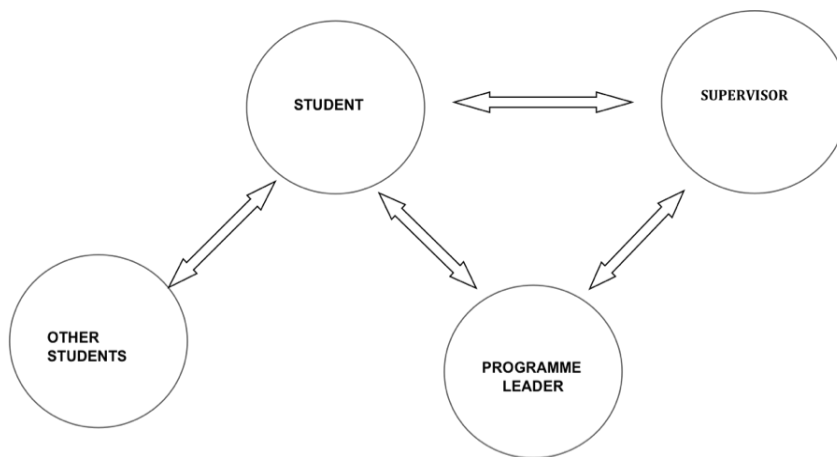


Figure 2: Community Conceptualization of Distance Master's Supervision

In the context of this understanding of the research element, an important challenge is trying to help the students maintain the sense of being a community of learners whilst working individually, at different paces, and in geographical isolation from their supervisor. As we have pointed out, the need for scaffolding and support during the dissertation process identified in the literature, particularly for distance study, is something the course leaders frequently stressed. This seems to be a key aspect of the support and approach to dissertation study at a distance, and those course leaders who do less of it are planning to attempt to do more.

Although we believe Figure 2 is a step forward from the traditional representation shown in Figure 1, the reality is probably more complex. A more complete view of the processes, participants and products involved would include administrators, documentary support (e.g. handbooks and programme documentation), disciplinary influences, etc. For example, the textual differences between disciplines does come through in the interviews, with the science based dissertations more likely to have a specific structure requirement, but the influence of

the discipline is not present in our representation. It is also likely that different programmes will present a different model – as for example, in Figure 3: This represents a programme where all written communication between supervisors and supervisees is conducted through the administrator. The impetus here is to have records of communication; we have therefore called it ‘controlled’ because we believe that the wish to control communication is behind the structure as it was revealed to us. This may be important where large numbers of supervisors are involved and aspects of quality and equity may be more easily monitored this way. It does raise questions about the quality of the emotional relationship between supervisor and student (eg as highlighted in Sambrook et al., 2008).

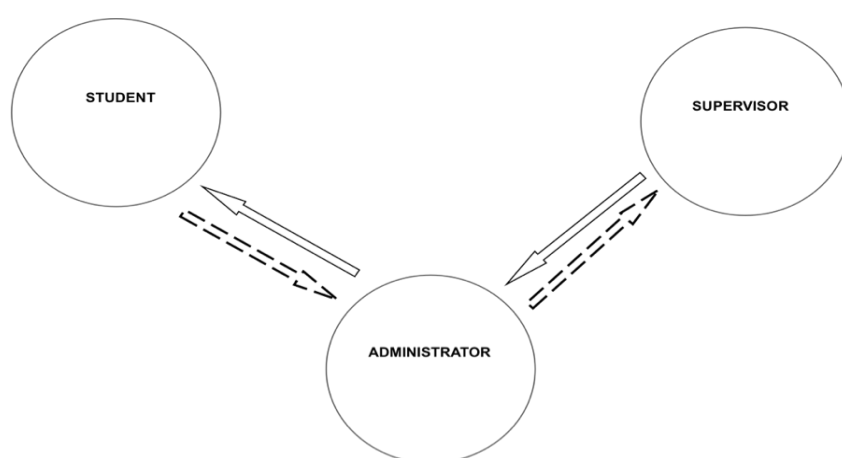


Figure 3: Controlled Conceptualization of Distance Master's Supervision

Conclusion

This study has shown that even within one structure such as the University of London (albeit a loose structure with a great deal of freedom for programmes), there are wide differences in the research element of Master's studies at a distance, in terms of the requirements, of staging the process and of supporting students. These differences are partly due to the multiplicity of factors that impinge on distance supervision. The findings also highlight the pivotal role of the course or programme leader in dissertation supervision at a distance where structure, timing and support are crucial. Future research could survey a larger number of institutions to see if such variation exists across universities as well. Another area for investigation could be comparing support offered on face-to-face and distance courses.

One limitation of this study is that it only presents the course leaders' views on the experience of Master's level research at a distance. Future studies could look at other perspectives on this, including those of the supervisors and the students so that a more complete picture of this process can be formed.

Our data also suggests that the supervisory relationship cannot be conceptualized as a supervisor-supervisee axis only. It works within a context; there are disciplinary influences, there are institutional influences and there are mediators such as the course leader who may be involved. These are not minor influences: the experience of a student who receives as much supervision as they want may be substantially different from that of a student whose supervisor allocates 5 hours to supervision and no more. This is not to say that one way is "better" than another; it is merely saying that there is a difference there, and the difference needs to be taken into account when discussing supervision. Future research on supervision will need to examine the relationship in its greater complexity and wider context, acknowledging the complex and multi-faceted nature of the process and looking for ways to make supervision a satisfying and motivating experience for all participants, so that it can more successfully fulfil its crucial role enabling and supporting Master's students in their learning and research goals.

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ⁱⁱ Different programmes refer to the research product by different names, with variation even within institutions. We use the terms ‘research report’, ‘research element’ and ‘dissertation’ interchangeably; note that in American English, the usual word for this is ‘thesis’, which in British English is normally reserved for doctoral work. We also use the term ‘supervisor’ constantly, although some of our interviewees used the term ‘tutor’.

ⁱⁱⁱ The University of London is a federation of colleges. Some colleges are large universities in their own right; others are smaller, specialist institutions. We have not anonymised the location of this study, but instead anonymised the colleges where our interviewees worked. Most of the programmes discussed in this study come under the aegis of the University of London External Programme (now renamed University of London International Programmes), all of whose programmes are distance courses.